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Review of "Homeworks: A Book of Tennessee Writers"

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OPINIONS AND REVIEWS

Tickle, Phyllis, General Editor; Swanson, Alice, Associate Editor. *Homeworks: A Book of Tennessee Writers*. Knoxville: Tennessee Arts Commission and the University of Tennessee Press, 1996. Hardcover \$35.00. Paperback \$17.95.

In *Homeworks: A Book of Tennessee Writers*, editors Phyllis Tickle and Alice Swanson present selections from over one hundred professional writers who claim, by residence or birthright, a relationship to the Volunteer State. That is the only commonality, and it proves to be too tenuous a center around which to organize this anthology—particularly since the regional aspects which might have unified the work are downplayed by design. As the editorial preface assures us, that “demigod of most southern literature,” the “sense of place” is relatively absent.

This intriguing editorial stance becomes problematic only as we realize that no alternative ideational or stylistic center is sought. Instead, the editors have chosen to arrange the selections simply by order of the author's birth, with occasional license taken “to achieve a more euphonic balance of types and genres.” This forewarning, though clearly stated in the preface, does not quite prepare the reader for the roller coaster ride to come, or for the result of that ride: the absence of any clear, let alone unified, aesthetic effect. Simply put, the book does not read well, in spite of the fact that it contains an abundance of good writing.

Given the lack of focus, one may at least expect tremendous variety, and it is here: broadly varying qualities of short stories, novel excerpts (both mainstream and genre fiction), academic essays, popular nonfiction, and poetry. A handful of pieces of each type achieve excellence, and those not always from the most expected quarters. One anticipates and receives, for example, fine nonfiction from such writers as Will D. Campbell and Stanley Booth. Campbell's “Herman's Present,” the book's second selection, sets the early standard for the level that a popular essay can reach. And the excerpt from Booth's “Redneck” does exactly what it should: it sends the reader in search of the whole essay. Often the poems, too, remind us that many national reputations are well deserved. Even the brief selections by Charles Wright remind us of his graceful line and mature, reposing voice; and Wyatt Prunty's near perfect

ear assures us that this is a rich age for more formal poetry. One assumes as well that Robert Drake's contribution, "Ella Biggs," will be about as good as short stories get, and it is; and that songwriter Tom T. Hall will remind us that his stories can demand our attention—even a cappella—and he does. But just as often, the greatest delight comes from unexpected quarters. Several lesser known writers line the first rank of this collection, as witnessed by the moving images of Roy Neal Graves's "Pentecostal Woman" and Bill Brown's emotionally charged lament, "Pact," lasting gifts by two poets not widely known outside the region. Finally, though, the volume's real surprise is in the abundance of powerful work coming from younger writers—indeed the last half of this anthology is stronger than the first. The poems of Linda Parsons, Wilmer Hastings Mill, and Jeff Hardin demonstrate a fully realized craft, and their too brief selections leave readers hungry for more. It is worth noting here, though, that while all of these poets demonstrate deep accomplishment, none of the three has yet published a poetry volume; maybe now is the time. Even more compelling in the "younger third" of this book are the short stories. Doug Gray's "The Drowned Boy" is a grisly rite of passage. It engages us in the shared experience of an old man and a boy, formerly only acquaintances, who must work together to haul in the day's catch—this time the body of a dead child, snagged on the man's trot line. Cathie Pelletier's "Mathilda Watches the Wall: Purple Trains in Northern Maine" is the story of a mother's loss of a child and the ensuing emotional scars, recounted in a fictive reality so cold that the recovery of maternal feeling is doomed. Nature, fate, and especially a nonattentive physician all demonstrate a malevolent lack of concern. Elaine Fowler Palencia's may be the coldest world of all. Her "The Lesson" tells of a poor woman's vengeance on behalf of her son. His pet chicken, the only frivolity in his nearly destitute existence, has been matter-of-factly killed by his stepfather. When, in a rage known only to the child, the mother executes her husband's much-loved hound, the reader is caught in an emotional bind: does one celebrate the act as a kind of quiet assertiveness? And if so, how does one reckon with the perversity of a situation which precipitates such cruel and ultimately ineffectual satisfactions? Palencia succeeds in creating an effect with all the dark power of Flannery O'Connor, but with less of O'Connor's comic sense, and with none of the elder writer's implied promise of salvation.

In spite of much strong work, however, this anthology is not ultimately successful. Even if we grant the editors' premise that "most people read anthologies randomly," and that "only book critics and,

presumably, the book's editors plus a very limited number of readers ever sit down to address an anthology from beginning to end," we must question the adequacy of the arrangement. We are not, after all, asking for thematic or stylistic unity. One could accept the juxtaposition of light magazine article with serious short story, even of an excerpt from a mainstream novel followed by a piece of light historical fiction, were it possible to intuit at least the felt sense that some guiding editorial hand has been making the choices we are tacitly asked to accept. But such is not the case. The hand that juxtaposes Malcolm Glass's angst-compelling "Witnessing" (a narrative poem centering on characters who accidentally witness tragedies and can never rid themselves of the visions) with Richard Speight's sentimental "The Pancake Man" (a pleasant enough puff piece in which the narrator discovers his relationship with his daughters has changed) does not inspire trust.

As a result, the book is difficult, at times even jarring, to read, and the difficulty yields no artistic payoff. Possibly it would be most accurate to consider this collection a "sampler"; it is, after all, an assortment of unrelated pieces which lets us know some of what Tennessee has to offer the world of contemporary letters. In that role, the book has significant value. Even the sampling function, however, could have been more successfully accomplished by a volume with a more coherently engaging focus.

—William Jolliff